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## Survey shows Alabama Indians have distinct health challenges

Posted by [Anna Velasco](#) -- Birmingham News July 12, 2009 11:00 AM

It comes as no surprise to the [United Cherokee](#) tribe that a majority of Alabama Indians use traditional healing for their medical needs.

Chief Gina Williamson said she sees it every week as people come to the tribal office in Guntersville for herbal remedies.

Don Rankin, commissioner of the [Piqua Shawnee](#) tribe, said members use medical doctors, but there is also a deep appreciation for the power of herbs and prayer.

"In my particular case, if I have an ailment, I go into the woods and do what I need to do," said Rankin, an art professor at Samford University.

The first health survey of the state's recognized Indian tribes has revealed that almost half of the tribes' members use traditional medicine exclusively and 30 percent use traditional healers in combination with standard Western medicine.

American Indians in Alabama -- 44,000 people, about 1 percent of the state's population -- have previously been deemed statistically insignificant in terms of governmental demographic study.

What the recently released [report by the Alabama Department of Public Health](#) shows, however, is that the tribes of Alabama have significant health challenges that set them apart. The incidence of heart disease, for example, is double the national average and almost double the state average, according to the survey of 1,200 households.

At the same time, screening rates for many diseases are below the state norm. Two of the tribes surveyed had about a third of their members living without health



Linda Stelter/Birmingham News

Gina Williamson, chief of the United Cherokee Ani-Yun-Wiya Nation, holds up several strands of Job's Tears necklaces strung by members and sold at the tribal office. The United Cherokees are also trying to market herbal remedies made by the tribe.

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insurance, much higher than the state average, which is 13.6 percent.

**Invisible minority:**

As important as the data pointing to tribal health needs is, so is the awareness the state report can bring to Alabama's "invisible minority," said Eloise Josey, executive director of the [Alabama Indian Affairs Commission](#).

"There are still people today who don't know what Indian tribes are in Alabama," said Josey, a member of the [Star Clan of Muscogee Creeks](#).

Alabama has nine state-recognized tribes. One, the [Poarch Band of Creeks](#) near Atmore, is also federally recognized.

Josey said many people try to cash in on being Indian, but only if people have tribal roll cards and are in a state or federally recognized tribe can they legitimately claim being American Indian. [\[Claiming Alabama Indian ancestry takes some proof\]](#)

"It causes a hardship to legitimate tribes," she said of the casual claims.

**More chronic disease:**

For its survey, the state health department looked at seven of the state's nine tribes. The Poarch Creeks and the Mowa Band of Choctaw Indians have their own reservations and their own health centers where data are collected.

Dr. Gaurav Parmar, who wrote the report, said one of the most intriguing results was Alabama Indians' higher rates of heart attack, stroke and heart disease, despite lower risk factors, such as lower rates of smoking, hypertension and high cholesterol than the state average and a better diet of fruits and vegetables.

The surveyed tribes have an average heart disease rate of 10 percent, compared with the 5 percent national average and 6 percent state average. The average tribal rate of heart attack or stroke is 9 percent, compared with 4 percent nationally and 7 percent statewide. But the rate of high cholesterol among the tribes on average is 22 percent, compared with 36 percent for Alabama.

Parmar, a medical doctor in the division of preventive medicine at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, said he hopes to get funding to study the issue more to learn whether the tribes' members were underreporting their true risks or whether something else is at play.

"It's a question of whether this is a matter of race or ethnicity," Parmar said. "It needs to be tested."

The health survey showed alarming health trends among the [Ma-Chis Lower Creek Indian Tribe of Alabama](#), based in Kinston. A third of the tribe has no insurance, only 52 percent of members have a health care provider and barely a third had visited a dentist within the year the data were collected.

Vice Chief Nancy Carnley said she wasn't surprised. Many of the tribe's members live in poor, rural counties where doctors are few, public transportation doesn't exist and jobs have no health benefits.

"We would love to have a health center for the tribe, but we just don't have the resources," she said.

One of the challenges to collecting the survey data, which began in 2006, was getting people to talk. Alabama Indians can be reluctant to talk openly, Josey said.

The forced removal of American Indians in the 1830s from the South to the West, and the subsequent decades of persecution and trying to blend in for those who



remained or returned, are not distant events to Alabama Indians today.

"Every treaty they've ever made with Indians has been broken, so they don't trust government," Josey said. "When you had people killed or land taken just because they're Indian, people are not going to be real trusting."



Linda Stelter/Birmingham News

Greg Holderfield looks for plants to be used in tribal medicines. The plant at his right knee is the coltsfoot, which is used as a cough suppressant.

#### **Blue-eyed Indians:**

Discrimination continues today, Williamson said. Some negativity comes from people who don't understand the Indian culture, and other criticism arises because many Alabama Indians don't look "Indian enough," Williamson said.

"We do tell our kids, because they don't look like that TV Indian, they have to be forgiving of the ignorant," she said.

Josey said American Indians in the Southeast have mixed with Europeans for hundreds of years, meaning there are true Alabama Indians who may have blond hair and blue eyes.

The Piqua Shawnees, who have many members in Jefferson County, keep their practices and customs to themselves, still. "We don't ballyhoo our beliefs," Rankin said.

The health survey showed that 90 percent of the Piqua Shawnees primarily used traditional healers. But Rankin said you'd never hear members advertise being a medicine man or woman.

"If a person is ill within the tribe, they know who to go to," Rankin said.

The United Cherokees, on the other hand, are more open to discussing their practices. The tribe's medicine woman died earlier this year of hepatitis. But other members are studying herbal medicine and working to carry on the tradition of natural healing.

The tribe makes a sinus medicine from blackberry leaves, based on the late medicine woman's formula, that it is selling from its office and hopes to market to a

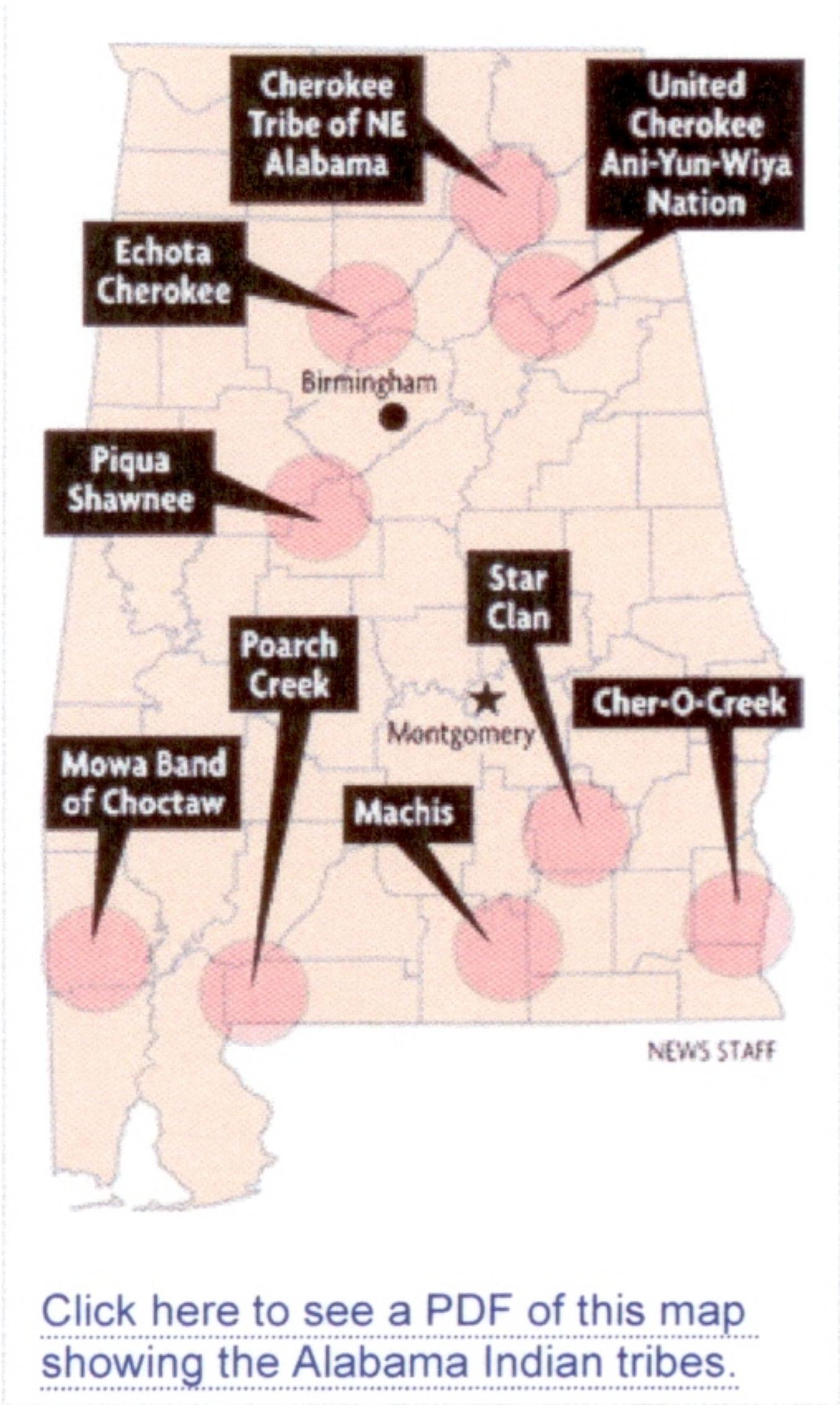


larger audience soon on its Web site.

Williamson said the tribe does not want to "sell" itself, yet it has a product that can help many and allow the tribe to sustain itself. As it is now, paying rent on the tribal office is a challenge.

"The years that we have prayed about this -- we have been led here," she said. "We make it for our people. We know what's in it. We think for us this could be a beginning to making a living for ourselves."

Join in the conversation below or e-mail Velasco at [avelasco@bhamnews.com](mailto:avelasco@bhamnews.com).



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COMMENTS (2)

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Posted by **Alabama1218** on [07/12/09 at 2:46PM](#)

The problems for the Indians in Alabama is the traditional discrimination and apathy of the U.S government ...and the State government of Alabama.

.  
.You may not be able to reverse History but you can move forward to a better tommorrow.

.  
.The trouble is as a people will not do it.....

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Posted by **Choctawslim** on [07/12/09 at 8:52PM](#)

If they don't look like Indians, then how do other people know to discriminate against them??? Of course if you have blond hair and blue eyes, but wear feathers in your braided hair and claim you're an Indian, then people will think you're an "Idiot" instead.

Most of these groups aren't "Indians" at all, they're just looking for handouts.

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